WORKERS TRIBUNE

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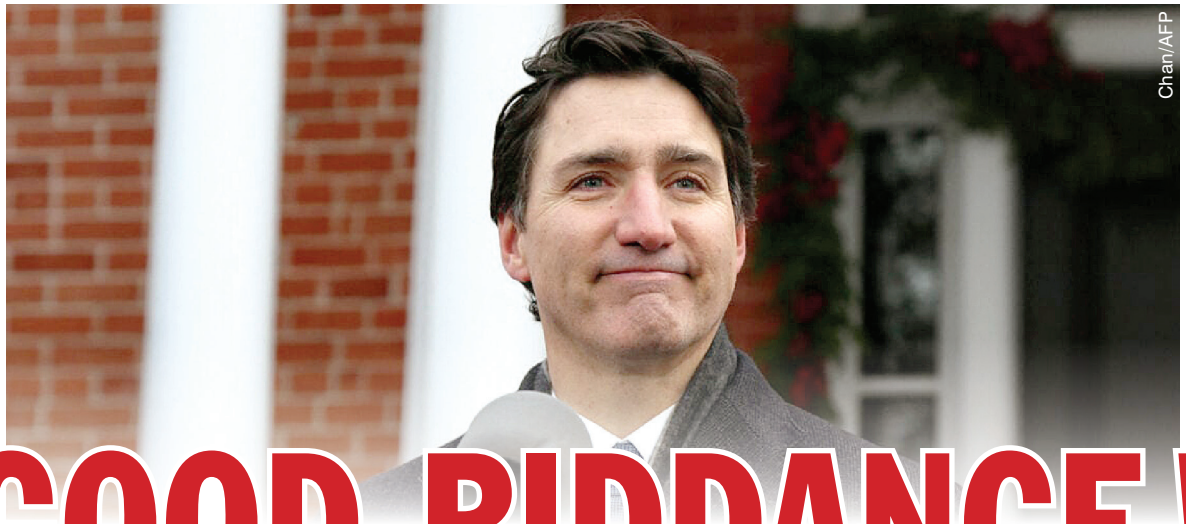
Chan/AFP

GOOD RIDDANCE !

Justin Trudeau has finally resigned, bringing joy to Canadian homes from coast to coast. But workers awaiting the arrival of Pierre Poilievre are asking themselves: what now? The answer to that question depends on the course followed by the labour movement. Will it be one of struggle or of submission. This choice will be determined by the kind of leadership provided to the working class.

The Canadian ruling class is in a deep crisis. The end of Trudeau is not just the end of one politician. At one level, his downfall is the complement of Trump's comeback, whose pronouncements about tariffs and the annexation of Canada have sent the political class into a tizzy. But more fundamentally Trudeau's resignation symbolizes the death of liberalism as the dominant ideology of the imperialist ruling classes in the West. As U.S. dominance over the world economy declines, liberalism becomes an expensive hindrance. The only "choice" before the Canadian ruling class is whether to appease Trump quickly or pretend to put up a fight and then cave.

Nowhere does the decline of liberalism hit harder than in the U.S.'s northern neighbour which has made it a raison d'être. Ever since Canada cut most of its ties with the decrepit British empire around World War II, it has served as the multilateralist "human rights" advocate on behalf of U.S. hegemony. This reached its apex in the post-Soviet period of the last 30 years, when neoliberal globalization reigned supreme under the watchword of "democracy." Despite a notable right-wing shift under Harper, Trudeau came to power doubling down on liberalism. And Canada's role remained highly valued by the U.S. ruling class; as Barack Obama put it in 2016, the "world needs more Canada." Today, Trump begs to differ, jokingly (?) referring to Canada as the 51st state.

The reality is that the U.S. has taken a hard right turn, and liberal Canada is reeling from it. Hit with this sudden change, the Canadian ruling class tries to show some muscle, but what muscle does it have to show? Without the liberal façade, Canada is reduced to its original essence: a geographic anomaly forged as a monarchic bulwark against the American Revolution, a prison for francophone Quebec and a pool of cheap natural resources. How much liberalism will remain in force around domestic issues is an open question since it is only a matter of time before Canada aligns ideologically with the U.S. One problem that will confront the ruling class is that Trudeauism has been central in fighting against Quebec independence with the tools of bilingualism and multiculturalism, both of which Tories generally reject.

What happens here will be closely linked to what happens in the U.S. Under Trump the U.S. ruling class will further seek to shore up its dominance at the expense of its economic rivals, centrally China, and by putting the squeeze on its allies. Given Canada's economic and military integration with the superpower, Canadian policies always keep it aligned with the U.S. And as right-wing populism has gained ascendency in the U.S. and around the world, liberal rulers themselves began shedding the very principles they espoused. As globalization's economic foundations (e.g., free trade and open borders) eroded, Trudeau and his ilk abandoned the groups they claimed to champion. This is shown by the Liberal government's increasing restrictions on immigration in the last few months, as well as its, and Biden's, unconditional support to the genocide in Gaza.

The last nail in the coffin for Trudeau was provided by Trump's threat of tariffs, threatening to push the economy into a recession. The tariffs are themselves an open expression of the declining U.S. empire. And just like free trade, protectionism will exacerbate the fundamental problems. Imperialist-sponsored trade barriers are a brake on the productive forces internationally and reinforce the parasitical nature of the U.S. economy and of its Canadian lackey.

The Canadian economy was already rotting, and productivity has been declining for years. The Liberal policies of printing money and relying on mass immigration to stave off economic crisis were not working. So, confronted with the threatened tariffs, the debate in the establishment is now how to best safeguard U.S.-Canada relations.

Opposing Trump's economic coercion has become a rallying cry for Canadian national unity from coast to coast. Even the Bloc Québécois joined the Liberals, NDP and Tories over the need to defend Canada. At the same time, it is perfectly understandable that working people are worried what U.S. imperialism under Trump could do. The problem is that relying on the Canadian ruling class, including its liberal wing, is a sure way to achieve nothing. They have neither the backbone nor the interests to stand up to the U.S. and will capitulate as soon as they can. Rather it is only the working class that can wage a struggle against Trump, and this means waging a fight against the American imperialists and their Canadian lackey by allying with the working class in the U.S. and Mexico. For one thing, the fall of Trudeauism could trigger a renewed fight for Quebec independence, but its success would be highly dependent on the level of working-class struggle, something which transcends the narrow nationalism of the Parti Québécois.

Another answer to American protectionism from the Canadian establishment has been to call for ***North*** American protectionism with Canada onside as a loyal partner to the U.S. Their response is: are you going to get energy from despotic rulers and rare earth minerals from China or are you going to get them from Canada, a loyal partner and stable democracy? Across the political spectrum, from Liberal to Tory to NDP, and including the premiers of English Canada and Quebec, there is consensus: show Trump how important Canada is to the U.S. This means beefing up the border, increasing military spending, waging economic war against China, and positioning Canada as a critical cog for U.S. dominance over neo-colonial countries like Mexico.

Whatever happens, the status quo is over. The upcoming Poilievre government, like Trump, will have to contend with the same forces that are leading to the decline of the economic order. A deep crisis lies ahead, and one thing is certain: the ruling class will seek to shore up its position at the expense of the working class, including by taking an axe to social programs. What the response will be from the labour movement will therefore be decisive. Should we expect an increase in labour struggle in the immediate period? Probably not, but defensive struggles will be on the order of the day. In fact, the last two years did see an uptick in strikes (e.g., rail, longshore, postal workers), but in each case the trade-union bureaucracy insured their defeats in the interests of preserving the Trudeau government, supported by the NDP. Rather than serving as a starting point for a labour counteroffensive and preparation to confront the incoming Poilievre regime, all these strikes were sacrificed on the altar of liberalism.

As the Liberals collapse, we can fully expect the current labour leaders to double down on their liberalism, which will bring ever more catastrophic defeats for the working class. The trade-union bureaucracy, and their NDP political arm, is thus clearly bankrupt as any kind of leadership: it needs to be removed from the scene. But what is going to replace it? In the coming period, it will be the task of the socialist left in this country to prepare and organize to be a real alternative. Unfortunately, for the last several decades, it hasn't been up to the task. The left is weak and divided with no real influence in the workers movement. That is because for years it absented itself from the fight against liberalism, either through accepting its ideological hegemony or by throwing stones from the sidelines in sectarian sterility.

The rise of right-wing populism with Poilievre points to a return of Canadian nationalism stripped of its trappings of liberal "progressiveness." But it would be a complete dead end if the left simply participates in refurbishing this "progressiveness." The Tory attacks obviously need to be met head on, but not with the tools of liberalism and social democracy. On key questions, whether it is economic strikes, immigrant rights, Indigenous liberation, trans rights—the answer must be a resolute struggle against the capitalist imperialist ruling class that oppresses us all. For instance, the legitimate fight for the national liberation of Quebec is not just of concern to the Québécois, but is in the interest of the entire working class in Canada and the U.S.

Regardless of whether Trump acts on his threats, the left must reject Canadian nationalism and fight to lead workers to struggle jointly with their brothers and sisters across the border. It must combat imperialist oppression, defend the Palestinians, oppose sanctions against China, Russia, and all other targets of U.S. imperialism and its Canadian junior partner. And all this must be done as part of a struggle to wrest the working-class leadership away from the pro-imperialist, pro-liberal heads of the trade unions and the NDP. Only if it does these things, will the Marxist left be a real factor in post-Trudeau Canada.

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